

Reversion of organic farms to conventional farming in Germany

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Abstract

In the past years a considerable number of farms have returned from organic to conventional production in Germany. Survey and interview results show that this change is due to a variety of personal and farm-specific as well as external factors. Here economic aspects as well as problems with the organic regulation and control system play a relatively large role. The diversity of the farm reversion constellations means that there is no central key point by which the reversion can be avoided. Instead, a mix of different measures is necessary that would lead to an improvement of the framework conditions for all organic farms.

Introduction

Organic farming has shown constant growth in Germany. The organically farmed area has increased by more than 12 times since 1990 and the number of farms has increased more than seven times. But these figures only describe the growth dynamic in organic farming to a limited extent. They only indicate the net increase and do not show the number of farmers that have returned to conventional farming. According to a statistical analysis of farm structure data between 2003 and 2010 this number is considerable; on average 415 farms, or rather 3.3 per cent of the organic farms were lost per year through a reversion to conventional farming - although the demand for organically produced foods in Germany has increased (Schaack et al., 2013) and different organic support measures were available (Nieberg, et al., 2011). These figures make clear that a further expansion of organic farming in Germany - as desired politically (Federal Government, 2012) - requires not just adequate incentives for conversion to organic farming, but also measures to avoid the reversion of organic farms to conventional farming. Against this background, the objective of this contribution is to identify the reasons for reversion and to show approaches that could result in a lower number of reverting farms.

Material and methods

Building upon a review of international literature and an expert survey on reversion of organic farms, the analysis used a written survey as well as semi-structured interviews:

- A German-wide written survey of all organic farms that deregistered from the EU organic control system between 2003 and 2009. From the returns of questionnaires, a data basis with 388 former organic farms which reverted to conventional farming was created and analysed.
- Personal interviews with 29 farmers with a specific focus on the reasons for the reversion as well as the proceeding decision-making processes.

The study results were reflected upon in four regional workshops with practitioners and experts in organic farming. Building upon this, possible approaches for the avoidance of reversion were derived.

Results

According the results of the survey, economic aspects played an important role in the decision to return to conventional farming. Of significance were particularly unsatisfactory farm incomes, marketing problems, low price premiums for organic products and low or reduced organic support payments. Further economic reasons for the reversion were high inspection costs as well as the expensive purchase of organically certified feedstuffs.

Among the central reasons for the reversion were also problems with the organic regulation and the control system. These were especially mentioned in the context of time-consuming documentation and reporting duties as well as requirements that were difficult to implement. In this regard the provision for bovine animals to feed 100 per cent organic feedstuff and the expiring exemptions for the tethering of cows were mentioned explicitly. Interestingly, technical production difficulties such as the increase of weed pressure, strongly varying yields,

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low yields of arable crops and problems with the nutrient supply were of somewhat less significance for the reversion.

The statistical analysis of the survey data makes clear that there are significant correlations between farm structure and reasons for reversion. For example, full time farmers mentioned much more often lower yields in arable crops as well as lacking cooperation possibilities with other organic farmers as important reasons than part time farmers. A lack of income improvement was cited more often as relevant for reversion by pig and poultry farmers, sheep and goat farmers, suckling cow and beef fattening farmers than by the farmers of other farm types (arable crops, mixed, dairy farmers).

Conclusions

The diversity of the farm reversion constellations means that there is no central point by which reversion can be avoided. Therefore, a range of different measures are necessary in order to improve the framework conditions for all organic farms, so that reversion will not be taken into consideration. The establishment of a coherent and reliable political framework, which leads to an increased competitiveness of organic farming with conventional farming in the long-term, is in this context a central challenge. In order to ensure the economic viability of organic farming, measures are also necessary which lead to an increase in the yield and production performance of organic farms. In addition, actors of the organic sector and the agricultural administration should make an effort to improve the transparency and practicality of the requirements, to eliminate the weak points in the control system and to develop better farm advisory services.

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